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## THE FRENCH PEASANTRY.

BY THE MARQUISE DE SAN CARLOS.

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THE French working classes as a race may be divided into two distinct sets: the field laborers and the city workmen. A study of the latter, however brief, would carry us inevitably deep into the socialist question, and we therefore prefer to dismiss it altogether and to limit our sketch to a rapid glimpse of the field laborer, the genuine country peasant.

We regret to say that a change for the worse has been observable of late years in this silent plodding economical kind-hearted race, which may be attributed to the abuse of spirits, the craze for city life and the new testamentary laws. The latter, issued during the French Revolution, decreed the division of every distinct species of property into equal shares among the inheritors. Their ostensible object was the enforcement of universal equality by preventing parental preferences while insuring to each child an equal share of his father's inheritance. But the real object was the breaking up of aristocratic preponderance by the ever-succeeding subdivision of its landed property and long-accumulated wealth. There is no longer the fear of disinheritance to keep within bounds the young scapegrace; there is no leaving the old homestead to the best manager on the condition of yearly instalments to other heirs. Everything must be broken up about once in thirty years and begun over again by new inexperienced hands. Many wait impatiently for the death of the old parents, then hurry off to the city where one out of a thousand succeeds, and one out of a hundred comes back to end his days as a menial in what was perhaps his father's house.

To avoid these endless subdivisions of his hard earned savings the simple-minded peasant has found no better expedient than

the suppression of heirs generally, and now cynically declares, like the noble millionaire, that he cannot afford to have more than one child ! In fact, were it not for the overflow of bordering nations, Spain, Germany, and especially Belgium, the want of hands in France would become a serious calamity.

Thus the law created to destroy castellated power and wealth has impoverished only the peasant, and produces, after several generations of this piece-mealing system, a nomad race that roam over the country at large or swarm together in populous cities, finding their new home in the liquor-saloon, where alone they are welcomed with outstretched arms.

The steady field laborer is very orderly in his habits and has a good dose of common sense. Each province has marked characteristics of its own. The Bretons, for instance, are staunch, enthusiastic Catholics and royalists, a stubborn race with a will of its own : excellent sailors, poor agriculturists and true patriots. The Provençal, on the other hand, has much of the Andalusian in his character ; something too of the Irishman : witty, poetical, improvident, grandiloquent, hot-headed, smelling of garlic and personated in Daudet's inimitable *Tartarin de Tarascon*. The Norman peasant is suspicious, miserly, cautious, a good bargainer who has never yet been known to commit himself by a decided yea or nay. The Northern man is clear-sighted in business matters and not overburdened with heart or imagination. He would let his house burn to the ground without caring to see the blaze provided it were insured.

Instead of branching off in search of the different shades which form the variegated moral coloring of each separate province, we will circumscribe our observations to the ever-widening zone that encircles Paris, and limit our sketch of French country folk to the village of "*X sur N*," situated at some fifty miles from the great throbbing heart of the country.

Like every French village, it has its *chateau* and its old stone church. Both are often historically or archæologically interesting. *Chateaux* vary much in size and splendor. Churches are all damp, dark and cold ; and when not beautiful specimens of gothic architecture, as a whole, are sure to have, at least, some curious old altar or window, or perhaps even a transept or choir of marvellous grace and ornamentation. But in the village I have chosen I regret to say there exists but one curious Norman door worth

visiting, and the *chateau* itself is by no means a *monument historique*, but simply a charming, unpretentious specimen of Louis XIII. style. Its park, which covers some twenty acres, is surrounded by a high stone wall, and there are long rows of lindens, trimly cut, so as to form deeply-shaded avenues. The lawns and commons of this pretty little *chateau* are exactly like those of every other *chateau* that respects itself.

On the first Sunday after my arrival at *X sur N*, the mayor in a long frockcoat and monstrous chimney-pot, attended by two municipal councillors, came to pay me his respects. He was a wizened up little man, who had held his office for forty years. On week days this important personage wears the blue blouse, the insignia of the people, and may be seen ploughing his own fields in all the glory of honest labor and comfortable dirt. In rather hesitating flourishes the little man welcomed me to his commune, and told me that I might hang my bracelets on the trees without danger, for at *X sur N* there were no manufactories, and consequently no anarchists; there were no poor, and consequently no criminals. Everybody owned his own homestead, be it a thatched hovel, or a spacious farm.

No manufactories, no mines, no railway station, no poor, no criminals! Surely the village of *X sur N* must be an earthly paradise. Such, indeed, were my feelings as I awoke on the morrow and experienced the soothing influence of that delicious calm which belongs to early morning in the country. I threw open my windows and leaned on the wide, low sill, breathing in the fresh air. An old-fashioned vegetable garden, with borders of peonies and roses, lay before me; to right and left soft expanses of greensward, enlivened by *parterres* of brilliantly-colored flowers. Sloping fields of wheat and rye waved in the distance; pines and oak trees rose in clusters among undulating hillocks, and the village itself nestled cosily in the midst of the pretty picture. Its new brick cottages, telling of modern comforts for the poor, and its old thatched huts, poetically covered with rich green moss, were strung like the beads of a chaplet along the road. Birds were twittering in the bushes close by, a few sang out loudly in the trees and gradually the buzz of insects became more and more distinct, until at last it seemed as though I could hear the plants breathing in their upward growth and see them slowly rising in search of the warm golden sun. Presently I saw

a man dart through the garden with a raised cudgel and before I had time to cry out another human form fell bleeding to the ground. My God! could this be crime? Had I then forgotten that men and women lived in the quiet village of *X sur N*, and that there were no less than three drinking establishments corrupting and lowering the moral and physical condition of the two hundred souls that formed the population of this very small place.

Hurrying forth I met a woman also hastening to the spot. It was the old story: love, jealousy and drink! And as each humble neighbor told me of his or her life's sorrow—for the simple-minded are ever glad to find sympathetic listeners to their tales of woe—methinks I discovered as much misery in the quiet country village as I had left behind me in the great noisy city.

Yes, *Mère Jeannette* had left the place and gone to Paris when a girl of fourteen to follow a brilliant young count who used to come shooting in the neighborhood. Within a year *Jeannette* had sent home a baby boy to be brought up by her mother. Three others followed in rapid succession, and only twenty years after did the pretty *Jeannette* return herself, a worn and faded woman, to find her mother among the dead and her sons hardened against her. In her loneliness she married a handsome, good-for-nothing village drunkard, and is now spending the last days of her life quarrelling with her husband.

Then we have *Mère Millet*, who never misses mass of a Sunday, but who beats her children black and blue and is so universally hated that nothing will make the neighbors believe her husband died a natural death. Next door comes *Mère Noirot*. She is ninety years old and looks like a picture as she sits by her window from morning to night at her big-wheeled silk spindle. All French people are neat and orderly, but in neatness and order *Mère Noirot* surpasses everybody else. It is indeed a pleasant thing to watch her as she folds up her great silver skeins of shining silk, or stands before her carved oaken press counting over the treasures contained therein. Yet it is pleasanter still to see her watering her flowers of a morning or carrying them back into her kitchen if it be eventide and she fear a coming frost. When the light of day ceases, *Mère Noirot* goes to bed, be it ever so early.

I took a friend to visit the old peasant, just as I would have taken her to visit some curious ruin in the neighborhood. Fear-

ing that she had misunderstood my introduction, Mère Noirot repeated after me : "Madame, or Mademoiselle ?" "Mademoiselle," I answered. "Well, it is time Mademoiselle thought about getting a man," replied the old woman bluntly. "No," I returned, "Mademoiselle prefers life without the encumbrance of a husband." "Ah! Mademoiselle is going to be a nun," continued Mère Noirot. "No," I returned again, "Mademoiselle is not going to be a nun. She paints all day long and she is very happy as she is."

Not to care to marry, unless one had a religious vocation, was indeed a thing neither Mère Noirot nor any other French woman had as yet considered a possibility. But there was such calm resolution in my friend's countenance, that, to my surprise, the peasant believed her, and after a few moments' silence she exclaimed with a sigh : "Well! I don't know but that Mademoiselle is right after all. I never had much comfort as long as my husband lived. Only nowadays, when night comes on and I have to stop working, I feel sore lonesome!"

The leading farmer of the neighborhood is a very rich man. He owns over a hundred acres of land, eighty sheep and twenty cows and half as many horses. His wife was educated at Dijon in a fashionable boarding school, and brought him eighty thousand francs dowry. Mulot has always from ten to twenty laborers at work on his farm, yet his wife keeps no servants. Madame Mulot cooks for the men, attends to the pigs and poultry and does all the milking and house-cleaning. Their only daughter is being carefully brought up in the city and is destined to finish her education in a still more expensive and fashionable boarding school than her mother's. But when Mademoiselle Virginie comes home, will she be quite as willing to work as her mother is? and if not, will she find a husband belonging to a higher station ready to marry her? It is a risk that may bring misfortune on the thrifty farmstead.

The field laborer lives principally on bread, lard and vegetables, with a bit of meat or a rabbit on Sundays. He never enters his hut without cutting off a chunk of stale bread with his pocket-knife, and, like all French people, he does not know what it is to taste pure water, but drinks home-made cider, beer or wine. His family has probably lived for six hundred years on the same bit of land! Ever tilling the same earth, planting and replanting

it, he has grown of the earth earthy. In days of trouble his family used to count on the lords of the land for assistance, but since the revolution the mighty have grown hardened towards the peasant and the peasant hates them back in return.

As to the girls, they are ever ready to cast away their pretty provincial *coiffe* for the sake of a bonnet, and with it go, as a rule, faith, honesty and female dignity. Still, let the French country girl turn out well and one cannot find a more thrifty, orderly housewife and clever business woman, nor a steadier, more earnest laborer than the French farmer who does not drink. Women, in the northern provinces especially, are more "courageous" at work, as the French say, than the men. In some parts of France they work in the fields like men. They share their husband's business or have some separate trade of their own.

In old times, a field laborer had little hopes of becoming rich, but nowadays young people often hear of some lucky chum who has turned up a trump in the city. They know there is no chance of finding in the fields a hen that lays golden eggs, so they never rest till they, too, get away. Some of these prodigals come home to die of broken health and spirits; many are never heard of again; a few return to live on their hardly earned savings and now and then to be supported by their "commune." It is a sad truth that the French peasant is changing into a hardened materialist. And it is by no means the Catholic cause I undertake to advocate. It is that of religion in the widest acceptation of the word. The Frenchman who gives up the faith of his fathers forfeits all faith, and consequently all moral restraint. It would be preferable to see him kneeling down every morning in the midst of his wheat fields to adore the rising sun, or stealing into the dark oak forest to worship the pale sweet goddess of the night—believing in something, if naught but the immortality of his own soul—rather than to find him a prey to the hard egotism which is dragging him down to the earth that has borne him, without consolation in sorrow, or hope for the future.

LOLA DE SAN CARLOS.